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Biden Can't Avoid Erdogan, But He Can Keep the U.S.-Turkish Relationship on Track

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Turkey's leader has caused many headaches in Washington in recent years, but letting ties deteriorate further would be disastrous.

When Joe Biden assumes office as U.S. president in late January, one of the thorniest foreign-policy challenges he will inherit is not one of his predecessor's creation. Indeed, the problem of U.S. relations with Turkey has wrong-footed U.S. administrations from both parties in the past two decades.

From Ankara's refusal to permit U.S. troops to cross the Turkish-Iraqi border in 2003, to sharp bilateral disagreements over Syria policy during the Obama administration, to Turkey's more recent acquisition of Russian air defense systems despite its NATO membership, the U.S.-Turkish relationship has given headaches to a long series of American presidents.

Yet lingering threats in the region and rising risks globally underscore the continuing value of U.S.-Turkish cooperation to both countries, and they highlight the importance that a Biden administration seek to rescue the relationship from its sharp deterioration, which under President Donald Trump deepened further due to disagreements over Turkey's incursion into northeast Syria and its opposition to Arab normalization agreements with Israel.

Turkey, which bridges Europe and Asia, also finds itself straddling the fault line of a seismic shift in U.S. foreign policy. U.S. strategy is consciously moving away from an emphasis on fighting terrorism and nonstate actors to a focus on great-power competition, particularly with Russia and China. Washington and Ankara have clashed on both fronts under Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump, disagreeing over how to fight terrorism in Syria, for example, as well as how to manage relations with Moscow.

The coronavirus pandemic may not usher in a new world, but it has accelerated a transition in the global order. The crisis has exacerbated U.S.-China tensions and has highlighted for many states the risks of supply chains heavily dependent on Beijing. While the resulting shift in U.S. foreign policy in East Asia is plain to see, its implications for U.S. strategy elsewhere have not been clear.

In the Middle East, which has been the prime focus of U.S. foreign policy for the first decades of this century, it is unclear whether Washington intends to execute the same strategy—defending a broad array of U.S. interests, especially counterterrorism, through direct intervention and heavy support for allies—with fewer resources, or forge a new regional strategy. This new strategy would consciously seek to look at Middle East issues through a great-power competition lens—preserving close relations with the region’s medium-sized powers and preventing inroads by Moscow and Beijing even at the expense of other concerns such as terrorism, as the Trump administration’s National Defense Strategy foreshadowed.

The likely answer is a bit of both. Facing a need to shift resources toward Asia, the U.S. government will increasingly look to outsource to its regional partners the safeguarding of mutual interests. Yet it will also seek to recruit those partners in a broader effort to buttress global order and norms against increasingly bold challenges from great-power competitors.

In any such reformulation of U.S. policy in the Middle East, the role Turkey chooses to play will be important—for better or for worse. It is the region’s largest economy, with a GDP reaching \$750 billion.

It has demonstrated—often to Washington’s dismay, these days—a willingness to use hard power to influence regional dynamics. It shares frontiers with Iran, Iraq, and Syria, and neighbors Russia across the Black Sea. Turkey is therefore a logical stop on China’s Belt and Road network. Turkey is positioned—both physically and politically—to influence the projection of Russian power southward or Chinese might westward.

Yet what has long made Turkey an important partner to the United States has also attracted the attention of Russia and China. Indeed, for any external actor, Ankara’s cooperation would significantly improve its ability to fulfill policy objectives in the Middle East. For Moscow and Beijing, the opportunity to exploit the present differences between Ankara and Washington to deepen the gap growing inside NATO offers an additional allure. The latest example of this is the showdown over fossil fuels in the Eastern Mediterranean between Turkey and Greece, which has divided NATO members and even hobbled the European Union’s effort to reach consensus on unrelated issues like Belarus.

Of late, the attraction has been mutual. After nearly consummating a deal for a Chinese radar system, Turkey took delivery of Russia’s S-400 air defense system and proceeded to test it over Washington’s objections, prompting sharp concerns throughout the NATO alliance and the real threat of sanctions from Washington. And faced with the prospect of an economic downturn and increasing difficulties in external financing, Ankara is interested in getting more Chinese investment and finance.

This has so far proved to be an elusive goal: Beijing’s share of foreign direct investment in Turkey stands at a meager 1 percent, and only 960 of the 61,449 [companies](#) with foreign capital registered in Turkey in 2018 were Chinese. However, Ankara has remained hopeful that China’s Belt and Road Initiative will bring further capital—especially as Turkey faces a growing economic and tourism crisis as a result of the pandemic—and has displayed no willingness to heed Washington’s warnings against adopting 5G technology from Huawei, for example.

Yet Ankara should be cognizant that any relationship between Turkey and China or Russia has its limits. Turkey-China ties remain handicapped by China's oppressive policy toward its minority Uighur population—who share cultural and linguistic links with other Turkic ethnic groups. Turkey and Russia, meanwhile, remain at odds over regional issues such as Syria, Libya, and Armenia, and are divided by a centuries-long mistrust over Russian efforts to expand its security envelope southward.

Even in the recent Russian-brokered peace deal over Nagorno-Karabakh, Moscow and Ankara disagreed over the question of Turkish peacekeepers. And neither Russia nor China can offer Turkey the security or economic advantages that Ankara's deep engagement with the West has delivered over the decades—an imbalance that Chinese efforts to parlay public health assistance into diplomatic favors in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic are only likely to highlight.

This does not mean, however, that a return to the status quo ante of U.S.-Turkish partnership is possible. Turkish policies such as the testing of the S-400 and strident statements from Turkey's leaders on matters such as normalization with Israel have led to serious questioning in Washington of the future of relations with Ankara.

These moves have also increased tensions between Turkey and other U.S. partners in the Middle East, especially the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, which are sharply at odds with Ankara both rhetorically and on the ground in various regional disputes. Adding to this dynamic, the reformulation of U.S. policy in the Middle East has changed the calculus of its partners in the region; rather than continuing to wait for the U.S. government to articulate a new regional strategy, the strongest of these partners are increasingly acting on their own initiative, often at odds with one another—for example, Turkey and the UAE are supporting opposite sides in Libya's civil war in the face of a diffident United States and divided Europe. More active U.S. engagement could help to moderate Arab-Turkish tension and open channels of communication, but the basic pattern is unlikely to change.

For all the problems bedeviling their ties, the United States' and Turkey's interests will still be better served by cooperation than antagonism. While nostalgia for the U.S.-Turkey alliance of the past would be misguided, so too would be assuming that the only alternative is enmity. For all of the serious disputes dividing them, Americans and Turks share an interest in limiting Russian influence in the region, countering Iranian adventurism, and preventing nuclear and missile proliferation

Yet the reality is that for the foreseeable future, even if the U.S.-Turkey relationship can be stabilized, it will be more transactional than in the past. This will require a greater willingness than exists at present to prioritize, to work out compromises quietly, to consult early to prevent disputes from arising, and to prevent every disagreement from turning into an existential threat to the relationship.

Biden, in his years as a senator and vice president, acquired a reputation for working out behind-the-scenes compromises. Quiet consultation may not be Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's usual approach to the West, but the election of a new Democratic U.S. president may give him enough pause to seek the more amicable, workmanlike relationship with Washington that would serve both the United States' and Turkey's interests.

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